

VZCZCXRO4049
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1288/01 2470835
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 030835Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2913
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2828
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3058
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001288

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, S/P
IO FOR ACTING A/S HOOK AND PDAS WARLICK
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHLEDBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND
DOD/OSD A/S LONG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [IR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)

LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, VETERAN SUNNI FIGURE
STRESSES NEED FOR MORE ASSISTANCE TO THE ARMY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for Reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) In his August 30 meeting with visiting NEA DAS David Hale, Minister of Culture and respected leader of the Sunni community Tammam Salaam stressed the need for progress in the Israeli/Palestinian peace process to defuse extremism in the region. Praising Hizballah's quick admission of culpability in the August 28 attack on a Lebanese Army helicopter, Salaam opined that a "security by consensus" understanding was emerging between Hizballah and the government. Salaam stressed the need for more powerful USG assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces, warned about continuing sectarian tension and rising extremism, as demonstrated in Tripoli, and expressed moderate praise for Lebanon's top three leaders, President Sleiman, PM Siniora, and Speaker Berri. End summary.

ISRAEL AND PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

2. (C) NEA DAS David Hale, accompanied by PolOff and ConOff, met with Minister of Culture Tammam Salaam on August 30. Salaam, a respected figure from a well-known Sunni family, said progress on peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians would be the main way to defuse extremism in the region, including in Lebanon. He later added that the inability of the USG to stop this extremism, along with other issues like Georgia, gives the impression that the USG is not in control. He lamented that so far there has only been lots of talk and little action on the peace process. On the issue of Sheba'a Farms, Salaam asked what Israel wanted in return for a withdrawal from the area. He added that Israel's refusal to withdraw from Sheba'a and its continued overflights over Lebanon fueled speculation that Israel secretly wants to give Hizballah justification to keep its arms.

3. (C) DAS Hale said that there was no question from his meetings that Israel continues to view Hizballah as a major threat to its security. He assured Salaam that concrete steps on peace were taking place between Israelis and Palestinians, but that they were being done behind closed doors. He also reaffirmed Secretary Rice's earlier comments

on working with Israel to try to come to a resolution on Sheba'a.

HELICOPTER ATTACK

14. (C) Regarding the August 28 attack on a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) helicopter, Salaam described Hizballah's admission of involvement as "not arrogant" and he praised the group's overall reaction after the incident. When DAS Hale questioned whether the latest incident meant that Hizballah now reserved the right to deny LAF aircraft freedom of operation in parts of Lebanon, Salaam said that what was evolving between Hizballah and the government was a "security by consensus" understanding.

USG ASSISTANCE TO LAF

15. (C) Salaam said there was a perception in Lebanon that the USG was providing too little help to the LAF; and that the equipment it was receiving was not powerful enough. Salaam thought USG fears that more powerful weapons for the LAF might fall into the hands of Hizballah prevented a more robust security assistance package. DAS Hale assured Salaam that the USG's assistance to the LAF was increasing and that the USG was committed to a long and enduring relationship with the LAF.

LEBANESE FRAGILITY

BEIRUT 00001288 002 OF 002

16. (C) Salaam said although Lebanon was on the verge of sectarian war in May ("another Iraq"), it was able to pull back because of the Doha agreement. However, he said that there was still residue from the May fighting, especially on the confessional level. He spoke of weekly sporadic confessional violence in Beirut as evidence that the current sectarian sentiment is tense. Salaam looked forward to two upcoming events to help possibly quell the tension: the National Dialogue and the ratification of the electoral law.

SITUATION IN TRIPOLI

17. (C) In discussing the recent clashes and bombings in the northern city of Tripoli, a Sunni stronghold, Salaam described the situation as one of lawlessness and an outcome of the fighting in Beirut in May. While the Future Movement of MP Saad Hariri is the dominant political force in the area, Salaam attributed the violence to small Salafists groups who were targeting the government and the Alawite minority, a Shia linked sect. Salaam said that the government needed to invest heavily in social services in Tripoli, an area that has historically been neglected by the government, in order to help quell the rising tide of extremism in the area.

LEBANESE LEADERSHIP

18. (C) Salaam took time to give his assessment of the three main Lebanese government leaders: President Sleiman, Prime Minister Siniora, and Speaker Berri. Salaam said he liked the President, but suggested that he was too cautious and did not weigh in heavily enough as he should. He said that Sleiman has conducted his presidency in a fashion similar to his previous position as Lebanese Armed Forces Commander: when faced with hard challenges Sleiman retreats too much instead of pushing back. Regarding Prime Minister Siniora, Salaam lauded him as a very dedicated and honest man. Salaam described Speaker Berri as having invested heavily in the government in the past fifteen years. He cautioned that Berri's interests were not necessarily aligned with those of

his fellow Shia and ally, Hizballah, and that he would have nothing to gain from the dismantling of this country.

19. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON